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DEATH-DOORS AND ASPHODEL

BY GEBTRUDE E. T. SLAUGHTER

SOME of the oldest palaces of medieval Perugia are to be found in the Via dei Priori, a narrow street that falls in steep descent from the Palazzo Pubblico, with its projecting spikes in readiness for the heads of the city's enemies, to the Church of Our Lady of Light. It was up through this street that the ten Priors of the city were led with pomp and circumstance to their assembly-place. Clothed in flowing robes and heavy chains of gold, they were escorted by trumpeters with silver trumpets to their accustomed seats of damask in the public square. At the foot of the hill, the street leads out through the fortress wall to the Church of Saint Francis of the Field, where Raniero, the reputed founder of the Order of the Flagellants, was one day joined by bands of angels who scourged themselves before the high altar and thereby gave divine sanction to a new method of salvation. Many other legends hang about this street down which poured, in later times, the blood of the High and Mighty Baglioni. But no tale of pope or saint or warrior is more curious or more significant than one dim and half-lost legend which, lacking the colour and the personal interest of the others, is preserved only in certain lines of stonework in the palaces that face the street. The low doorways of these dwelling houses are made of travertine carved into garlands of fruit and flowers, and close beside them, in the same grey palace walls, may be traced the outlines of other doors, taller and narrower, pointed at the top and unadorned, and filled in now with bricks and mortar. These are the doorways of the dead,—the *porte del Mortuccio*, they were called. Through their narrow openings the bodies of the dead were carried out of the palace, and they were then walled up again or they were closed with heavy doors secured by bars

of iron. According to the legend, the Spirit of Death would enter in again by the same door by which he had passed out. And so, because it was easier to break through the solid masonry of their walls than to re-shape the fabric of their fancy, they opened doorways for the dead and closed them against his next approach.

It is a curious illustration of the spirit of the times, this attempt to shut out death with stone and mortar. Such a legend, preserved in stone or verse, will often reveal more clearly than many histories the vital principle by which the people lived. And especially is this true when it concerns the dead. For the thought of death is the foundation of religion, and nothing is more significant of the quality of a civilization than its attitude toward death.

The legend that is written in the Perugian death-doors is a typical instance, even if an isolated one, of the changes that had come over the world since the days when the ancient poet had said: "To desire impossibilities is the sickness of the soul." It was a truism of the pagan world as we know it that it is folly to struggle against the inevitable, that not even the gods strive with necessity, that death waits for all alike, the mighty and the lowly, the strong and the weak. "From all lands the wind that blows to Hades is the same." Death was the one inexorable god whom no sacrifice could appease, whom no human act could touch. From him there was no deliverance, "neither by wealth nor by war, nor by many-towered walls, nor by dark, sea-beaten ships."

It was in the power of the Greek genius to involve the fact of death in a form of beauty that was at once a veil to hide its ugliness and a light to illuminate its truth. The Greek's fear of death was his unwillingness to lose the light of the sun. He hated the darkness in proportion as he loved the light; and he was intensely conscious of the fact of death as the dark background of the vivid life he loved. To relieve that background, he cast over his thought of death a glimmer of pale blossoms. He peopled the abodes of dream with the souls of the departed; who lived there a dim reflection of the life of earth; and he carpeted the meadows where they walked with asphodel.

As a flower of earth, the asphodel depends for its beauty upon its surroundings. It fades at the mere touch of the commonplace. Growing by a dusty roadside, it is colorless

and coarse. It lacks distinction and has barely the power to arrest the eye. While the broom or the gentian conquers the shower of dust and rises boldly to match the sun or the sky, the asphodel is reduced to nothingness, to a dull and graceless shadow. But rising among the fallen columns of a Greek temple, these clusters of dim blossoms possess a rare and unforgettable beauty. Their tall forms are sculpturesque in their calm dignity. Their ashen petals are tinged with a pale, evanescent pink. Their leaves are the shadow of green. They are the flowers of all flowers that must have grown in the gracious twilight of the gods. "There, in the land of dreams, beyond the gates of the sun, in meadows of asphodel, dwell the phantoms of men outworn." And from there came back to living men "tales of the dead, haunting as music."

The legend of the asphodel-meadows is typical of a people in whose imaginative grasp of truth poetry and religion were united. They did not attempt to deny the existence of evil and misfortune, of disease and death, but they subdued the grim realization of these things to a tender melancholy. The sorrow and the mystery remained, and an infinite pity for one who must descend to fields of asphodel while poppies still danced in the sun and many-colored anemones still waved among the grasses of earthly fields. The words attributed to Leonidas on the eve of Thermopylae, "To-night we shall sup with Pluto," have been quoted as an illustration of the calmness with which the Greeks viewed the approach of death. But much of the sombre tragedy of Greek literature would have been impossible if the poets had maintained in the affairs of ordinary life this Spartan attitude of the battle field. It is rather the warrior spirit of all times, when, in the face of danger, the issue of life or death becomes as a mere turn to the right or to the left. The typical Greek sought to absorb the thought of death in the ardor of life. He did not strive in "sickness of soul" for the impossible. But to the Middle Ages nothing was impossible, and the rich lord of Perugia set himself with frantic haste to the performance of an act which the ancient world had barely conceived as a possible vagary of human effort and then had condemned as the most foolish of follies.

The old distinction between the ancient and medieval worlds—those time-honored backgrounds into which we so conveniently fitted the scenes of either age—disappear from

the field of the modern historian. However much we may have enjoyed the belief that "the bird of the morning sang through antiquity," we are compelled to regard the Greek mind as weighted with a melancholy that was no less real and persistent than its buoyancy of youthful life. However much we reveled, on the other hand, in what the soulful eyes of emaciated saints told us of the great Christian sacrifice, we are constrained to behold a motley crowd, here and there and everywhere in medieval Europe, vigorous, cruel, and merry, having no concern beyond tomorrow's fray or tonight's *affaire d'amour*. In the light of modern criticism, Homer no longer represents the childhood of a race, the beauty of dawn, the nearest possible approach to nature. According to this view, the Iliad and the Odyssey are a medieval product, written down during the highly cultivated period of a culminating civilization. As for those centuries of European history that we have called the Middle Ages, the term has no longer any real significance, since the latest edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica* announced that "the Middle Ages are a myth."

And yet after all is said—when Christian philosophy has been traced to Plato, and, in a similar way, when every break or barrier has been removed from the stream of history—there must remain certain broad distinctions between the pagan and medieval worlds at their best—between, let us say, fifth century Athens and the twelfth century of Italy and France. After all conceivable readjustments of our ideas, it will remain true that the spell by which the Middle Ages holds us is the fascination of strange and stupendous inconsistencies, and that the supreme charm of Greece is the charm of harmony and beauty in all phases of life. If one wishes to find successfully applied to life Joubert's famous maxim for art: that it must combine "*L'Illusion*" with "*La Sagesse*": one looks to Greece. If one wishes to see both love and hatred set loose without restraint; if one wishes to see the conceptions and emotions of the mind at once exalted to their highest and debased to their lowest, one looks to medieval Europe.

An age which had produced Saint Francis and Ezzelino da Romano; an age of which the mighty Hildebrand, despising the world and seeking to rule it, was the chief exponent; an age whose teaching was based on that of Gregory the Great, who was possessed to the depths of his being by the

most frantic and barbaric fear; an age which said "the body is naught" and yet devoted the wealth and humanity of two centuries to the recovery of the tomb of Christ from the Infidel; an age of which the primal force was the triumph of the spirit over the flesh, while the dead bones of a martyr became its seat of authority from which was decreed the fate of nations—such an age repels and attracts by its incomprehensible contrasts.

The difference between an age of such inconsistencies and the time of Phidias and Sophocles is apparent in many phases of art and life, but nowhere is it more evident than in their characteristic views of death.

It was the tendency of Greek thought to justify the ways of nature and to concentrate the forces of the mind upon the cultivation of the art of life. Whatever weakened that effort or brought it to an untimely end was lamentable misfortune. The brevity of life, therefore, rather than any thought of death, became to the Greek a motive for action. "If life were eternal," said Sarpedon to Glaucus, "never would I fight here in the foremost ranks. But, since ten thousand fates of death every way beset us, now let us go forward and try it out, whether we shall give glory to others or they to us." To the Greek, not death was bitter, since that was the common fate of all, but to die before the allotted time or before one had received his due of happiness and honor. "Why gatherest thou the unripe grapes of youth?" said one to Hermes. "Pity him who was beautiful and died," said an Athenian epitaph. The Homeric hero going down to death bewailed his fate in that he must lose manhood and youth. He slept the sleep of bronze most piteously because he had lost his hope of joy in his wedded wife. According to Thucydides in the great oration of Pericles, "They may be deemed fortunate who have gained honor and whose days have been so ordered that the term of their happiness is likewise the term of their life." The sombre truth underlying so much of Greek tragedy, that no man is to be counted happy until his death, implied a fear, not that the end would arrive too soon, but that it would delay too long, until the proud nature of man had called down Nemesis upon himself and so destroyed his joy in life.

All this is the very antithesis of the mediæval view. It cannot be wholly true, as Machiavelli maintained, that Christianity had made cowards of men. Too many other causes

had been at work in the long centuries of the mingling of Latin civilization with barbaric culture. Moreover it may be asserted without fear of contradiction that the most triumphant note of all religions is the Christian's cry: "O Death! where is thy sting? O Grave! where is thy victory?" How was it possible that, under the domination of a religion with so courageous a watchword, the whole world should be stricken with terror and fall prostrate beneath the burden of an impending fate? Was it that the horrors of Hell had so wrought upon the mind that dread of the Last Judgment had resolved itself into an abject fear of death? Certain it is that from the time of Gregory's profound concern for the damnation of the wicked, and, still more sweeping, of the indifferent or the unconvinced, the preoccupation with the thought of death had grown apace, and every means was seized upon for postponing the day which should open the door, perhaps to everlasting joy, but more probably to everlasting woe. The death doors of Perugia are but one of many mechanical devices by which men sought to ward off the inevitable. "*L'art de chicaner avec Dieu*" was practiced everywhere, not alone by the vulgar crowd, but by the leaders and the teachers. Statecraft was imbued with it. Even chivalric love was not free from it: and the most joyous of lovers were likely to end their days behind the closed doors of some convent wall (the most popular of all contrivances) to escape this haunting fear. The religion of the day had so far fallen from its spiritual ideal of perfect peace that whereas Jerome had said: "In the mind walk abroad in Paradise," Pietro Damiani, following the lead of Gregory the Great, exhorted his hearers to "ponder upon death alone," to "meditate upon the tomb," and to "brood with quaking bowels over the sudden coming of the Day of Judgment."

They who had said "There is no death" stood shuddering before its spectre. Those who believed that, for the righteous, death was the exchange of earthly tribulations for everlasting bliss exalted the dead Christ above the living and adored the Crucifix, counting the sorrows of his life as nothing compared to the suffering of his death. But the Greeks, who offered no crowns of glory after death, looked to the end more calmly and accepted it more easily. Resignation is not primarily a Christian virtue.

When, in the tragedy of Euripides, none but Alcestis

was found who would die that Admetus, the king, might live, it was counted a shame to his aged parents that they refused to surrender their brief remaining space of life in order that he might enjoy the long years that were his due. And when Alcestis of her own will went down to Hades, no horror mingled with adoration was aroused, but only infinite pity that one so young and happy was to exchange the richness of life for the dullness of death.

The Greeks faced death as a fact, dwelt for a moment on the pity of it, and then turned with renewed vigour to the pursuits of life.

So calm was the Greek's temper of mind that he could, without shrinking, admire the beauty of physical death. Herodotus tells the story of the youth Philippus whom the people of Segeste had slain in battle and stripped of his clothing; but because of his great beauty they repented them of their deed, buried him with all ceremony, and honored him as a hero.

In the sixteenth century, when Matarazzo wrote his *Chronicles of Perugia*, pagan ideas were again returning to earth, for, in the midst of that turbulent tale that so well depicts the fantastic life of the later Middle Ages, we come upon such descriptions as these: "On his Lordship's body fell such a storm of blows that he lay there with his winsome limbs all stretched on the earth. Then at once the soul left that beautiful body and departed." "All wept to see the life fail from those fair limbs and they stood and gazed so earnestly on that comely form that they utterly forgot to fight."

To an age in which truth was to be worshiped "without form or comeliness and fastened to the cross," physical death had quite another meaning. It was not enough that, in their refusal to become dust and ashes, men had reduced the whole world to ashes. To make life in reality "the body of this death" which they had declared it to be, they venerated with a grim and shuddering fascination the dead bones of saints and martyrs. This is the dark side of a variegated world—the black shadow that clung to its brightest visions and most radiant ideals. Everyone knows the story of this strange frenzy—how tamed Saxon kings left off their feats of prowess to make pilgrimages to the graves of saints; how Lombard chieftains thought it worth their while to ransack tombs for fragments of dry bones; how

popes ordered the bodies of anti-popes to be thrown into the Tiber to put an end to their miracles; and how, in outbursts of hatred, bodies were snatched from the tomb and put on trial, condemned for crimes against Holy Church and denied the right of Christian burial.

Everyone knows, too, how devils and demons peopled the air and drowned the voice of God with their noisy clamour. It was often a matter of nice reckoning for the frightened mortal to know which voice it were wise to follow. When Peter the Cruel, on his way to meet Bertrand du Guesclin, lost his way in a marsh, his followers exhorted him: "Sire, be of good courage, for God and his Mother will guide and save you." "*Je ne sais pas, dit il, comment la fortune en va, mais je me tiens à qui a le plus de puissance, soit de diable ou de Dieu.*"

Trembling fear gave way in feverish reaction to the grotesque mirth of the Dance of Death. Albrecht Dürer's Death and the Knight, although typically medieval in design, is much too calm in spirit to belong to this frantic age. It does in fact belong, like Matarazzo's Chronicles, to a later time when the ideals of an age of reason were breathing a different spirit into familiar images and forms of thought. Grim and grotesque materialism continued, however, throughout that great twelfth century, when Italian cities were enjoying their most complete independence, when French Communes were being emancipated, when artisan guilds were at their height, when Chrétien de Troyes was composing his songs of King Arthur and his knights. And all throughout this time monks were ascending the thirteen steps of humility, and the pure prayers of saints were mounting up to heaven. It was the best period of the great cathedrals, where, beneath arches and spires that rise with a mighty sweep of power toward the upper air, sculptured saints and prophets and angels join company with contorted monsters—the divine dream of faith with the grotesque nightmare of a haunting fear.

The wisest souls of all ages have attempted to free the mind from the fear of death. Plato's Socrates, seeking for his companions a charm which should frighten away "that hobgoblin, the fear of death"; Epicurus and Lucretius, formulating a religion of death which should prove that the great curse is in reality the great blessing; and in that later pagan world, when the revolt against death, destined to

become hysterical, was already manifest, Marcus Aurelius, recalling to men's minds the fact that death is natural, like flowers in Spring; and a thousand years later, Saint Francis of Assisi, rising above the conception of his times and saying to corruption, "Thou art my brother," and to the worm, "Thou art my sister"—these are but a few of the masters who have offered to mankind a way of escape, not from the reality of death, but from the degradation of its fear.

In the shifting mirrors of modern life the ideals of all ages are reflected. In every country of the western world, the old religion lasts on with its medieval cosmogony and its relics of the saints. Along the shores of Brittany—and not there alone—the spirits of the dead still walk by night and control by their demands the actions of the living. In the Spanish Escorial, where the ruling monarch descends the marble steps and sees among the tombs of his ancestors the sarcophagus that was prepared for him centuries ago, there is preserved the temper of a people who still make the naked fact of death the chief lesson of life.

But these things are survivals. It has not been the habit of our generation to look toward the approach of death as a warning or a spur to action. We have not been pre-occupied with the thought of death or of what may lie beyond. Perhaps even before the Christian hell had lost its terrors the Christian heaven had lost its charm.

In our effort to develop the powers of life for our own and future generations we have approached nearer, through evolutionary and altruistic teaching, to a world-consciousness which makes our own personal end of ever more remote concern. We have striven to enlarge our spirit to include, as far as possible, the life of the universe.

Death is itself the great doorway to all mystery—the two-faced god Janus, looking back to joy or pain and forward to light or darkness. Yet we have sought, in the delights and torments of our busy days, to put the thought of death aside as a hindrance to the demands of life.

There is also an organized research by learned men who venerate unalterable law and yet fix their attention upon the forward look of the two-faced god. They believe that the door is closed not upon inscrutable mystery, but upon a palpable world that may be explored by the mortal mind. To them no sea is so dark that they will not tempt

it with an adventurous sail. It is one of the strange surprises of modern life that just when we had issued from the "fight with death" over which the generation of *In Memoriam* agonized; just as we had turned away from their pre-occupation as from a darkening of vision, and had begun to say to ourselves: "All that we know is this: We are here. Let us make what we can of our world": just then the great enigma became the subject of experimental science.

It is true that no sounds have yet been heard from that region of mystery which can compare in grandeur and majesty with its unbroken silence. Yet, recently, echoes have reached us which have given new meaning and new importance to the great research. Far above the trivial details that can but irritate the skeptical, these echoes of the spirit stir the imagination. Even if they prove nothing—perhaps, indeed, by their very deepening and enlarging of the mystery—they resolve the blackness of death into many hues and qualities of color. They cast over the thought of death a shadow of Beauty, like a "glimmer of pale blossoms."

It is the testimony of the ages that a clear-eyed facing of Death shows him a friend and not a foe. But it is one thing to face him as a scientist, or in the meditative mood of a Maeterlinck, and another to face him in grim reality. What, then, will be the effects of the great upheaval of our times—with its myriad-headed forms of death? If the philosophy of the future is being wrought in the trenches, will the idea in the poems of Corporal Street prevail—that war has stripped Death of his mantle of awe? Will the feeling of a Rupert Brooke be universal?—

And if these poor limbs die, then safest of all.

Or will the philosophy of the trenches be so modified in millions of desolated homes that the grim monster shall be reinstated and endowed with undreamed-of powers of cruelty? Will he seem no longer an instrument of God, but human-made, and will a fear haunt the fireside that he will still stalk the earth for his prey until he has destroyed the Frankenstein that created him? When the exaltation that sees in this war a divine method of regeneration and the depression that calls it the death-dance of the nations shall both have passed away, will the thought of death be kindly?—

Though death be poor, he ends a mortal woe.

And will there be any place for the heroic view of Peter Pan that death is the greatest adventure of life?

Certainly there seems to be small chance in the ghastly details of modern warfare for the Greek idea of the beauty of physical death.

When one has climbed the storm-swept mountain above La Cava and stood in the Crypt where all that remains of the First Crusaders is massed in a promiscuous heap of skulls, one realizes as never before the reckless waste of that fierce age, and the great price it paid for its unreasoning devotion. What shall one say among the mountains of corpses that are today piled high to mock earth and heaven? Is one likely to recall the words of Pembroke when he found the dead body of young Arthur rolled at the foot of the castle-wall?—

O Death, made proud with pure and princely beauty.

Psychologists tell us that the fear of death and the love of life have their origin in the same primitive instinct of self-preservation. But the thread that joins them in one instinct has grown thin. For the keenest lover of life may be dauntless in the face of death, while the weariest prisoner that ever dragged a chain may cringe and tremble in dread of the end. For the courageous spirit, to cling to life is not to fear death. It is to be untamed by any fear and to demand no consolations.

The poet has always made death beautiful. The warlord has always made it hideous. Yet to the young soldier in Paul Bourget's novel death was beautiful as no Greek poet could ever make it, because it was the gift of his life. While, to the wise surgeon gazing calmly at the laws of nature, death was a gnawing fear. Life had become everything to him; as it has been everything to our humanitarian age.

We know how the world was changed by the One Great Sacrifice. What may not result from the multiform sacrifice of the present hour? What reconciliation may we not conceive between the barbaric passion of violent revolt and the calm wisdom of reasonable acceptance in an imaginative grasp of truth?

GERTRUDE E. T. SLAUGHTER.